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Local studies collections online: an investigation in Irish public libraries

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Abstract

Research paper

Purpose: To investigate how public libraries in Ireland are using their websites to present local studies collections online.

Methodology: All the websites of public libraries in Ireland were evaluated against a checklist of 50 criteria by one of the authors. An analytic description was provided of the four highest-ranking websites and semi-structured interviews were held with staff in these library authorities.

Findings: Several interesting trends in Irish local studies and their online presentation were identified. Overall the websites were well-presented and had a strong sense of branding. Users of these websites typically come from the Irish diaspora in Europe, the US and Australia. Library 2.0 'tools' had been adopted by three of the four authorities investigated, adding value to their websites. Recommendations for future developments are included.

Originality/Value: This research should add to the relatively sparse literature available on local authority local studies websites.

Keywords: Local studies collections, Ireland, Online, Web, Public libraries, Evaluation

Word Count: 9127

1. Introduction

Many public libraries are now making use of the Web to make users aware of their local studies collections and are also involved in digitising some of their collections. In 1998 the Library and Information Commission in the UK produced a report (Parry, 1998) which provided an overview of digitisation projects in progress at that time. In Ireland, The Irish Library Council report, *Branching Out* (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 1998), recommended "a programme of digitisation of local studies materials, beginning with unique/rare resources, but with the long term aim of making the holdings of all local studies sections available in digitised form". A Cultural Heritage Panel, managed by the Irish Library Council, was set up in 2002/2003 to investigate the possibility of achieving this aim. The Panel carried out research on the holdings of local studies collections around the country as well as preparing a

programme of pilot digitisation projects. The research was published in a report, *Our Cultural Heritage: A Strategy for Action for Public Libraries*. It was suggested that the digitisation of local studies materials in public libraries would “support social inclusion and life-long learning” (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2003). The project resulted in a portal website called Ask About Ireland (<http://www.askaboutireland.ie>) which allows access to selected digitised content from public library collections across Ireland. *Our Cultural Heritage* concluded that digitisation was viable in public libraries and museums, that library staff were enthusiastic about digitisation projects, and that there was a high demand among the general public for digitised historic material online. A national digitisation strategy for Ireland was recommended.

However, a review of the literature has shown that there have been no recent studies carried out on the quality and quantity of local authority local studies websites in Ireland.

This paper is based on research, undertaken for a masters dissertation, which aimed to investigate how Irish public libraries are using their websites to present local studies collections online. The key objectives of the research were to:

- find out how many library authorities in Ireland are using websites to present their local studies collections;
- evaluate these websites using a checklist of criteria;
- carry out an analytical description of the local studies’ presence on a small sample of local authority local studies websites;
- gain more detailed information on these websites by interviewing local studies librarians;
- assess the attitudes of local studies librarians to presenting their collections through the medium of the Web.

Although much work has been carried out on digitisation projects this research concentrates specifically on websites. Digitisation has become an important development for local studies; however this project deals with it as one element only of the library’s website presentation. The digitisation of local studies material brings a number of advantages:

- it improves access – both multi-user and remote access;
- it enables the preservation and protection of fragile materials because it reduces the need for physical contact with documents etc;

- when the digitised material is displayed on a website, it can act as a further means of promoting the collection (Barber, 2002).

However, there have been concerns about the push for digitisation in local studies. Reid (2003), for instance, argues that traditional local studies services should not be abandoned in favour of a completely digitised service.

2. Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives of the research project, three different approaches were taken:

- website evaluation using a checklist;
- analytical description of selected local authority websites;
- semi-structured interviews with selected local studies librarians.

2.1 Website evaluation

A checklist of criteria by which the researcher (Barry) used to evaluate each of the 32 local authority websites in Ireland was developed. Evaluation checklists for websites including those developed by Anderson et al. (1998), McLachlan (2002) and Waller (2004), as well as the guidelines for assessing information sources on the Internet (Cooke, 2001), were consulted. In addition, local studies criteria were specifically created using the researcher's background knowledge on the subject and the guidelines on evaluating local sources developed by Reid (2003). All the websites were evaluated by the same researcher (Barry) during June 2007 on the same computer, thus providing consistency between tests. The sites were tested at the same time of the day (morning) to ensure the connection speed was consistent. The evaluation checklist evaluated what the user sees when they visit these sites.

Fifty evaluation criteria were chosen and all criteria were given equal weighting. For each of the 50 criteria the researcher recorded a tick in either the "Yes", "No" or "Not applicable" box on the form. The criteria were divided between seven main themes:

- First impressions
- Content and coverage
- Authority
- Currency and maintenance

- Design and multimedia
- Accessibility and navigation
- Sources and services for local studies on the website.

These broad categories, with the exception of the local studies sources and services, are commonly used for evaluation of both print and electronic sources. In particular, issues of authority, content, coverage, currency, maintenance and accessibility are standard categories (Cooke, 2001,8; Katz, 1997,26-29; Reid, 2003,211-214; Smith, 1997,6.0). Finally, because the sites were specifically dealing with local studies, it was important to include a separate category to deal with this topic. For a full breakdown of the evaluation criteria, please refer to Appendix A.

2.2 Analytical description of selected local authority websites

Four websites were chosen from the top scoring sites from the evaluation in order to give examples of best practice in the field. Each website was discussed in terms of the following topics:

- Background information
- First impressions of site
- Content and coverage
- Unique features of site
- Limitations of site.

2.3 Semi-structured interviews with selected local studies librarians and related staff

In order to satisfy the final three objectives outlined earlier, a series of semi-structured interviews were held with local studies librarians and those working within related areas (information services/eLibrary services) in the four selected authorities (Cork City, Clare County, Dublin City, and Kildare County). In total, seven members of staff were interviewed from the four authorities. Semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most appropriate method of interviewing as they provided both flexibility as well as a set list of questions/topics. It was felt that this would make it easier to compare results and analyse data at the end of the four interviews.

Each interviewee was assigned a number to ensure anonymity when it came to taking detailed notes from the interviews. These numbers were randomly allocated.

A list of questions was drawn to acquire more detailed information on the individual websites and to discover how local studies librarians felt about using a website to present local studies. The interviews were used to ‘flesh out’ the figures that had emerged from the evaluations and to give background to the subject area by talking to professionals working in the field. However, it should be noted that as the interviewees were chosen from the top-scoring websites, it was clear that these authorities were the most progressive concerning the use of the Web to present local studies. Therefore, the results would not give a totally balanced view of the attitudes of *all* Irish local studies librarians and the use of *all* local studies websites. Themes were identified following analysis of the recorded interviews and attitudes compared.

2.4 Limitations of methodology

Overall, the combination of research methods was successful in investigating how Irish public libraries are using the Web to present their local studies collections. However, there were limitations that should be noted. Reid (2003) has noted the difficulties of evaluating electronic sources for local studies. Although the checklist of 50 criteria was a convenient way of testing a large number of websites, it proved unsatisfactory in evaluating the quality and sheer variety of local studies sources available on these sites. For example, a well-designed website with little digitised local studies content could receive the same score as a badly-designed website with rich online local resources. Also, all evaluations were carried out by the researcher (Barry). This failed to give an overall picture of what users are actually looking for from a local studies website. However, despite these flaws, the checklist did provide an overall picture of local authority local studies website provision nationwide and also allowed for some form of comparison between the sites (Cooke, 2001).

3. Website evaluation

Out of the 32 public library authorities in Ireland, 28 had a local studies webpage or linked website. Of the remaining four, three had no local studies section on their own library webpage but included a link to the Ask About Ireland website where their

library authority had its own section. One of the four had, however, no local studies section and no link to Ask About Ireland.

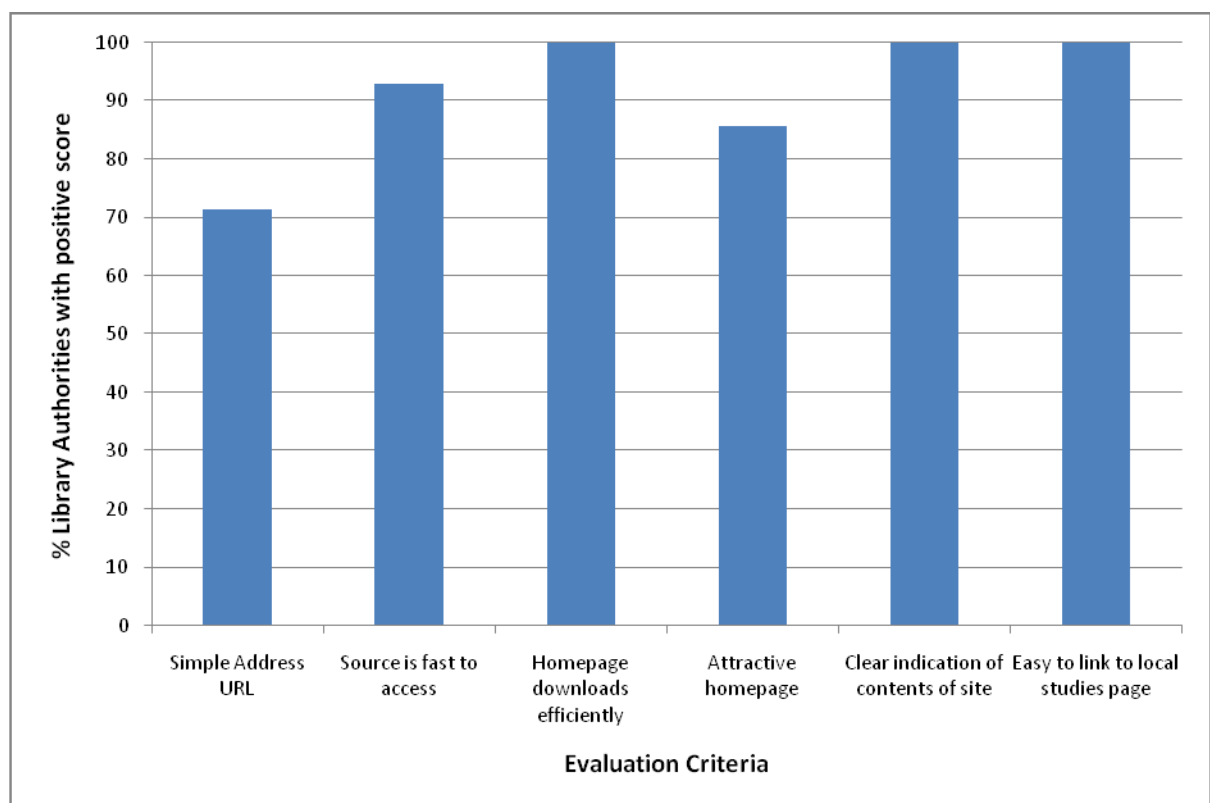
When evaluated using the checklist, and allocating one point to each Yes box ticked, the highest scoring authority (45/50 or 90%) was Dublin City Libraries and seven other authorities (County Clare, Cork City, Tipperary, County Kildare, County Mayo, Waterford County and Limerick City) scored 70% or over. At the lower end of the scale, seven library authorities scored between 30 and 50% - most of these provided no more than basic information on the contact details of the library's local studies collection.

3.1 Theme 1: First impressions

Figure 1 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria in this theme.

Take in Figure 1

Figure 1: Results of First impressions theme (N=28)



All 28 authorities evaluated scored highly in this section of the evaluation as they had homepages that downloaded efficiently (without any errors or site maintenance reports), were well signposted in terms of site content, and contained links to their

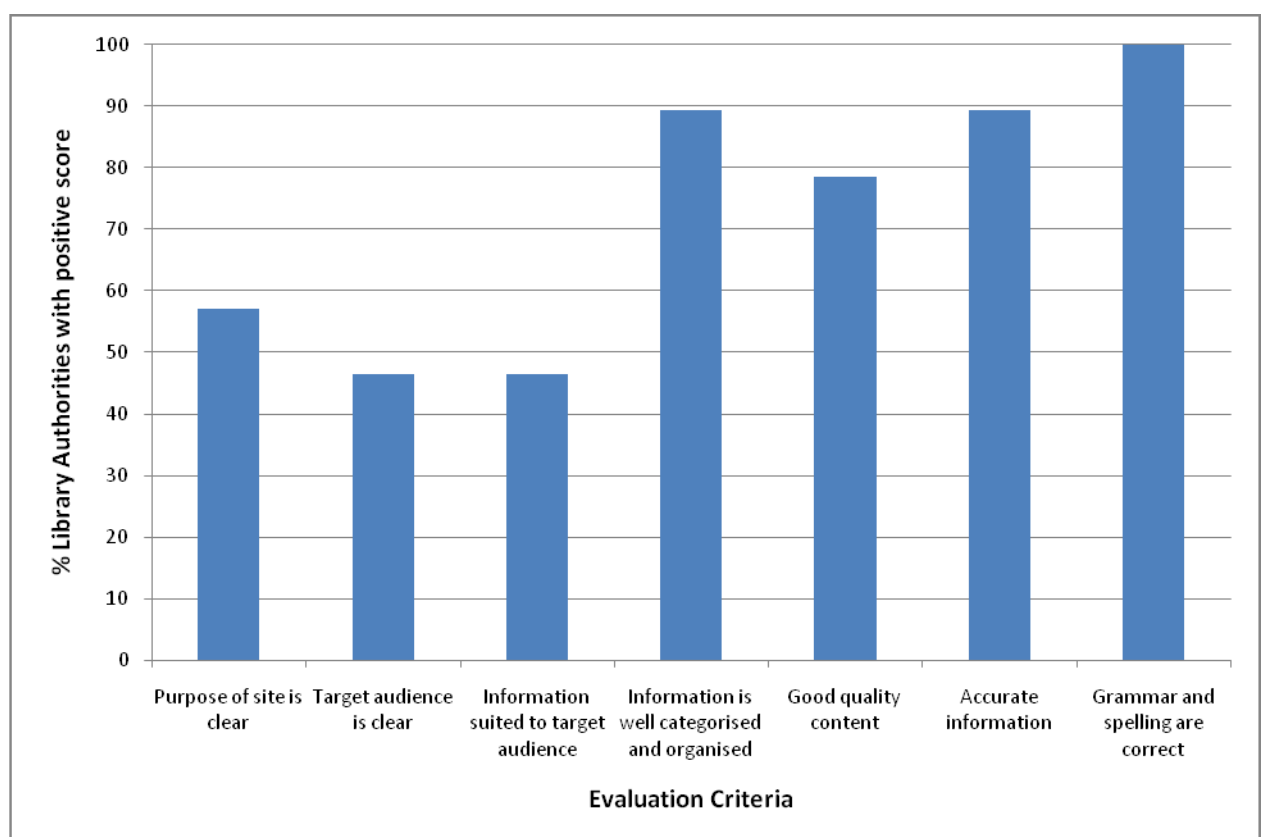
local studies pages. A small percentage of authorities had unnecessarily long and complicated web addresses that can make it difficult for users to remember. Often, those websites which were slow to access had very detailed and interactive content which outweighed the frustration of waiting for the source to download.

3.2 Theme 2: Content and coverage

Figure 2 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria in the content and coverage area.

Take in Figure 2

Figure 2: Results of content and coverage theme (N=28)



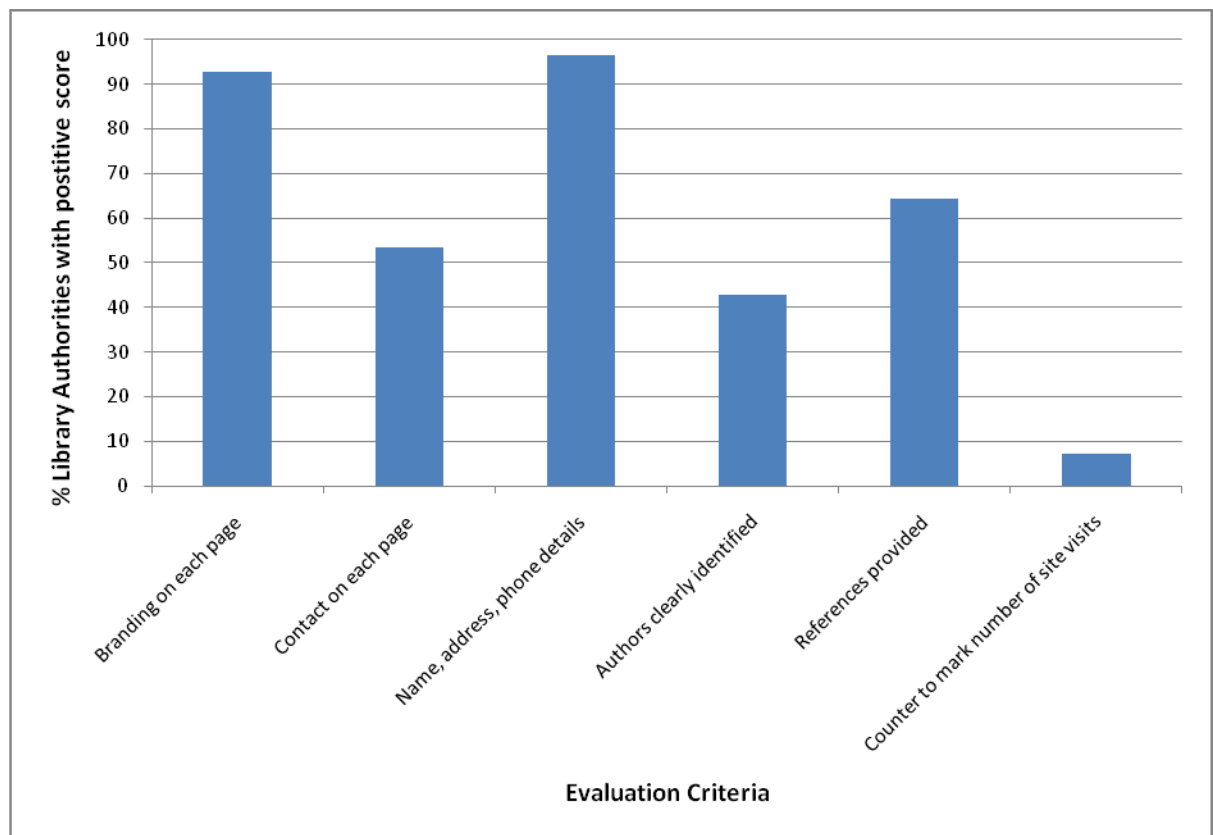
As would be expected for library authority sites, the majority of authorities provided accurate, well-organised quality information. However, many sites lacked a clear purpose and failed to provide adequate detail on the aims and objectives of both their website and their local studies collection.

3.3 Theme 3: Authority

Figure 3 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria in the Authority theme.

Take in Figure 3

Figure 3: Results of Authority theme (N=28)



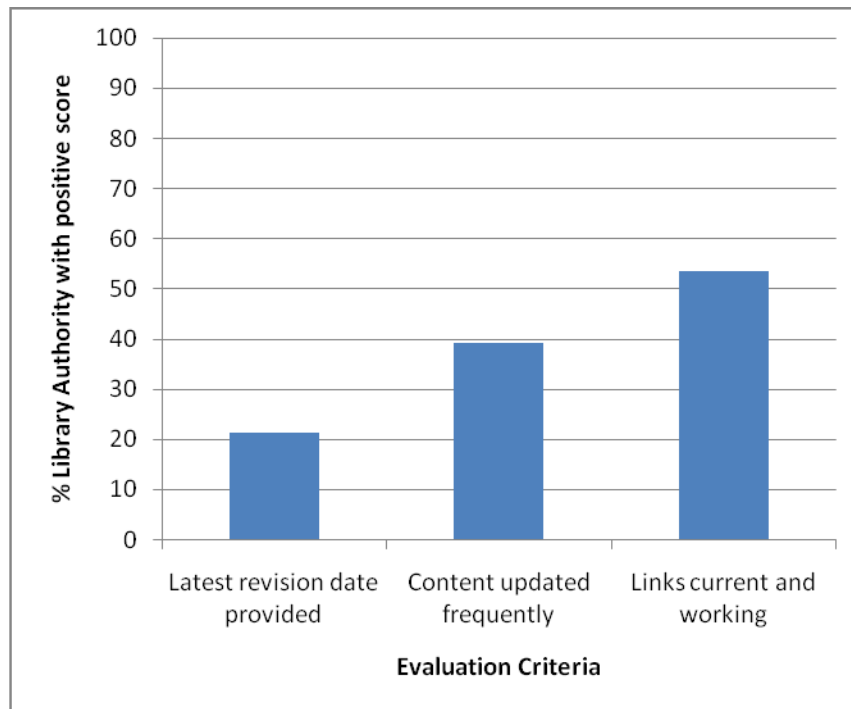
Most library authorities had strong branding throughout their websites and provided basic contact information for the local studies department. However, a little less than half provided a contact on every page and this information could be difficult to find. There were also difficulties with finding authors of online material and quality references. Lastly, less than 10% provided a counter to mark the number of visits to their site.

3.4 Theme 4: Currency and maintenance

Figure 4 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria in the currency and maintenance section.

Take in Figure 4

Figure 4: Results of Currency and maintenance theme (N=28)



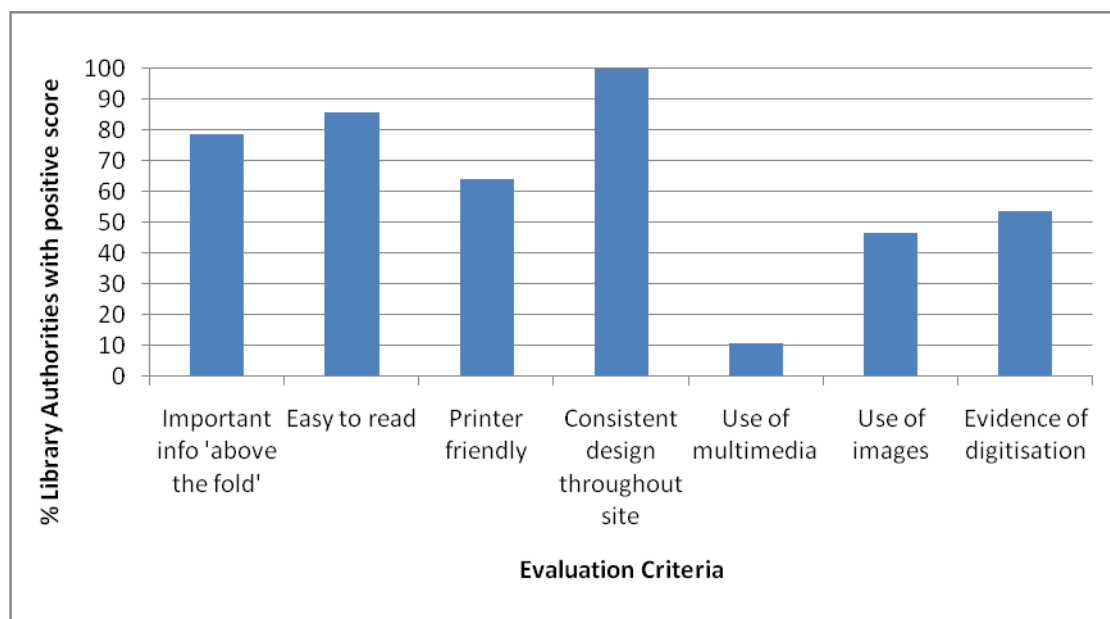
This was an area of evaluation where library authorities scored badly. It was difficult in many cases to find the latest revision dates and to assess how frequently content was updated. Likewise, dead links were common with just over 45% of authorities maintaining more than two dead links on their sites.

3.5 Theme 5: Design and multimedia

Figure 5 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria in the design and multimedia section.

Take in Figure 5

Figure 5: Results of Design and multimedia theme (N=28)



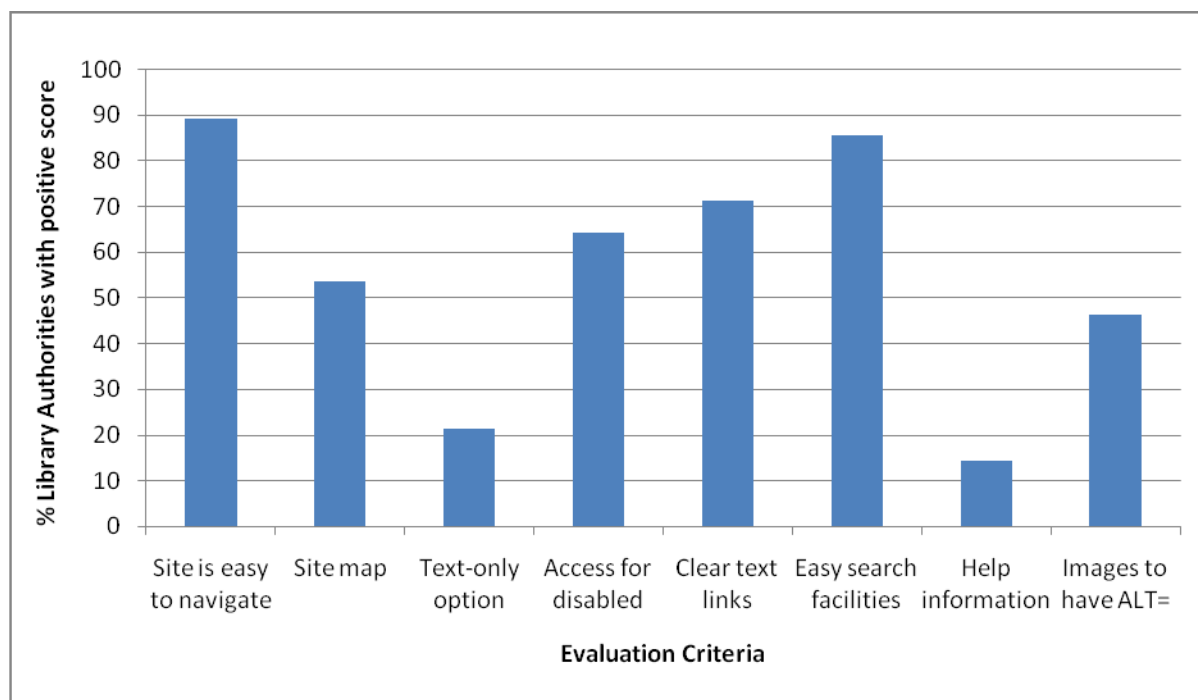
The results of this section of the evaluation showed that public library authorities have, for the most part, succeeded in making their sites easy to read and well designed. There were still problems on many sites with printing information. Also, information was often hidden further down the page which required much scrolling (i.e. 'below the fold'). Less than half of the authorities evaluated used images on their sites and just over half showed evidence of digitisation on their sites. A very small minority (three library authorities) had used multimedia (audio or video files) as an alternative form of presenting local studies materials.

3.6 Theme 6: Accessibility and navigation

Figure 6 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria in the accessibility and navigation section.

Take in Figure 6

Figure 6: Results of accessibility and navigation theme (N=28)



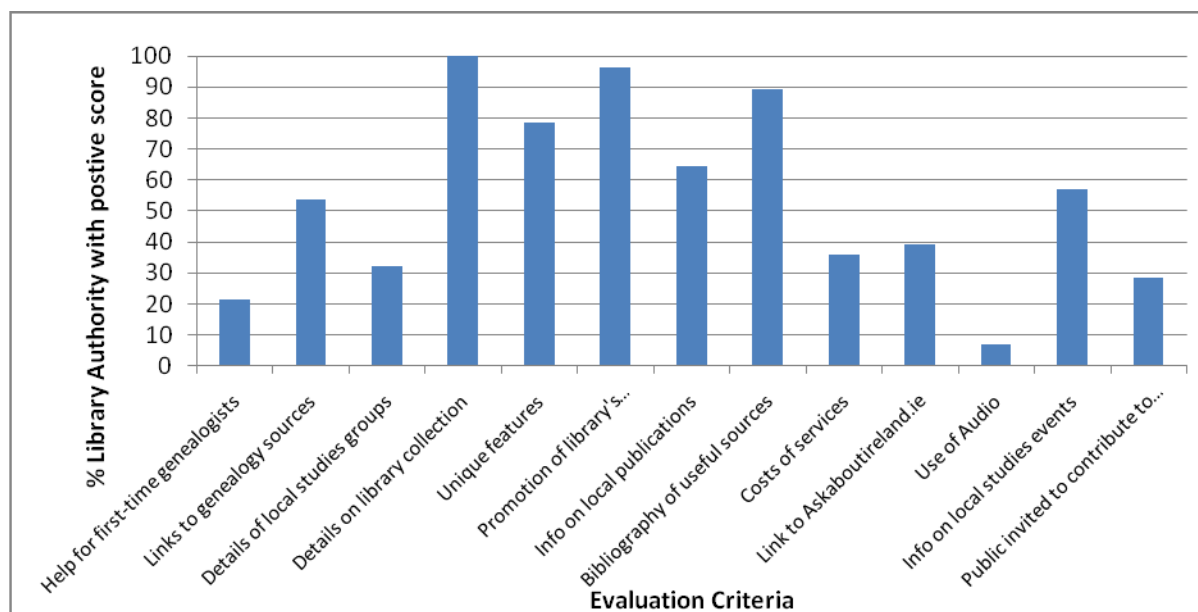
Many public library authorities in Ireland are in the process of making their websites more accessible for all users including the visually impaired. This came across in the evaluation with over 60% providing some kind of access for disabled users (including voice activated software). Most sites were easy to navigate and provided comprehensive search facilities. However, very few public library authorities provided any sort of help information, even in the form of a ‘frequently asked questions’ section.

3.7 Theme 7: Sources and services for local studies on websites

Figure 7 shows the overall percentage of total public library authorities evaluated that received a positive score for each criteria related to sources and services for local studies.

Take in Figure 7

Figure 7: Results of sources and services for local studies theme (N=28)



This was the most detailed section of the evaluation as it dealt specifically with local studies sources and services. A high percentage of public library authorities provided good information on the library's local studies collection, including detailed bibliographies and lists of sources. The majority of authorities had unique features on their websites which were unavailable elsewhere. Surprisingly, considering the rapid rise in popularity of family studies, there was very little help available for first-time genealogists. Also worth noting was the lack of linkage (60%) with the Ask About Ireland website. This section of the evaluation also highlighted that most public authorities could better use their local studies pages to promote events, local groups and gain contact with their members. This is still an under-developed area of the websites. Another area that could be developed further is the use of audio on the websites to allow users to listen to oral history, folklore or music – just two libraries evaluated provided this option.

3.8 Summary of the website evaluation

Using the criteria checklist to evaluate these websites demonstrated both successes and failures of local authority local studies webpages. The average score of the 28 library authorities which did have a local studies webpage or site was 62%. Overall, the evaluated local authority local studies web pages were successful in creating a good first impression for the visitor and in providing informative local studies content. Branding was strong, as were lists of sources and services for the user interested in local studies. Problems arose with issues of currency and maintenance

with more than 50% of the authorities evaluated failing to provide last revision dates and up-to-date content. Lack of help facilities, especially for first-time genealogists, was also surprising considering the growth in this area.

Some websites were difficult to navigate due to text-heavy pages or an emphasis on scrolling down. Digitisation, the use of images and the use of multimedia are all areas which show room for improvement, but this could be an area for future development. There was also a lack of communication with the user on many sites. E-mail, blogs and forums could be developed in the future to make these sites more interactive.

4. Local studies websites in four selected authorities

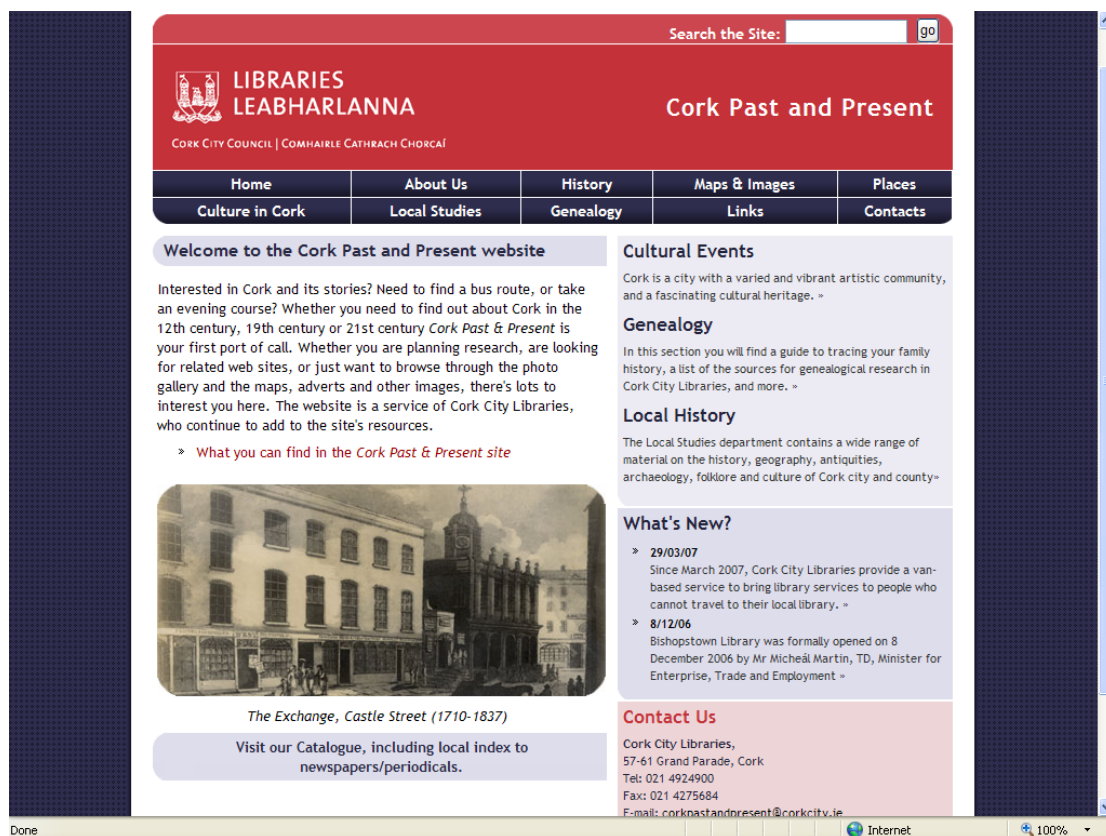
4.1 Cork City Libraries

The Cork Past and Present website (<http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie>) was launched by Cork City Libraries in late 2004 and aims to provide information on the city's history, culture, places, people and events. At the time of the evaluation (June 2007) the website had 200 pages and 300 images and gets approximately 600 visits a day. Excluding internal users, the majority of these visitors come from the US, followed by Ireland, the UK, and Australia. The most popular areas of the website are the Images and Maps section followed closely by Genealogy.

The homepage of the site is shown in Figure 8 and is visually attractive and well organised. The main sections of the site are clearly identified through the 10 subject headings at the top of every page, allowing easy navigation. Contact details are present, and there is also a separate section for What's New!

Take in Figure 8

Figure 8. Cork Past and Present homepage



The majority of the material on the site is dedicated to local studies with an emphasis on local history. Special features of the site include its maps and images section, which includes a wide selection of historical digitised maps showing the history and development of the city. These date from 1545 to 1893 and are a useful resource for researchers who cannot access the physical collection.

Limitations of the site include the fact that there are no searchable databases or searchable online publications. Much of the text has been specifically written for the site; whilst this makes it easy to read and ensures that the information is of interest, it doesn't allow the more advanced researcher much scope to do research online. For more detailed information, the user would still have to access the physical local studies collection. The culture section could also be expanded, and a greater community input could be encouraged (for example, local studies publications could be published online).

4.2 County Clare library

County Clare library has had a web presence since the late 1990s (<http://www.clarelibrary.ie>). The website is based around the idea of place – the County of Clare – and covers everything from literature to arts, heritage to community information. The website had had over two million hits since 1998 with the

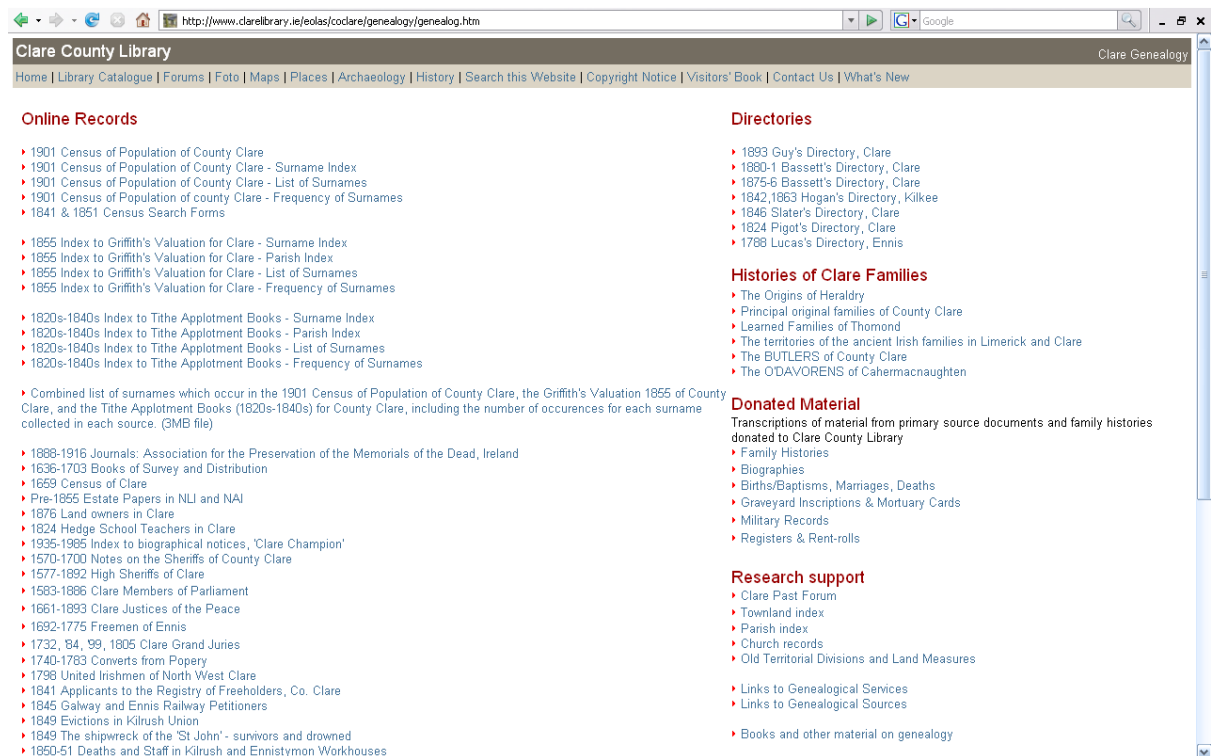
genealogy section accounting for a large volume of the visitors to the site. The site is unique in terms of the sheer quantity of digitised resources available online, including a fully searchable 1901 census for County Clare. An online web forum has also recently been developed. All this was largely achievable because of the work of a library initiative called Clare Local Studies Project (CLASP). CLASP was founded in 1995 by four library staff members to “develop awareness of and increase access to sources for local studies in County Clare”

(<http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/library/local-studies/clasp/>). The library funded a community employment project in conjunction with FÁS (the Irish National Training and Employment Authority) and over 300 people were employed over the 10 year duration of the project.

The main subject topics on the Clare Library homepage include community information, archaeology, folklore, genealogy, history, literature, people and places. There are also several digitised photo and map collections. The genealogy section attracts the most users and, as an online resource for family historians (most of whom are accessing from the US, Canada, the UK and Australia), it is invaluable. The section includes an extensive collection of digitised online records, directories, histories of Clare families, donated materials from remote users and research support as can be seen in Figure 9.

Take in Figure 9

Figure 9: Clare Library genealogy web page



Limitations of this site are linked to the fact that there is so much material available that it becomes ‘text-heavy’ in places. The site can also be slow to download at times, probably related both to the volume of users it attracts as well as the amount of information it holds. Also, despite the wealth of historical resources, there is no help section available. Helpful advice is given to users via the visitors’ book but a new user would be unaware of this aid.

4.3 Dublin City Libraries and Archives

The Dublin City Libraries and Archives website is just one section of the overall Dublin City Council website and can be accessed at: http://www.dublincity.ie/living_in_the_city/libraries/heritage_and_history. The site combines resources from both the Dublin and Irish collections and the Dublin City archives. Within the website, the most popular pages are ‘Family History’ and ‘North Strand Bombings’ (which contains digitised photographs of the 1941 Dublin bombing). Over 50% of the site’s visitors come from Ireland, with the UK, the US, Australia and Canada making up the rest of the top five user countries. The website contains detailed information on the various collections available within the library, as well as sources and services for family historians. Audio has been used to allow users

to listen to the annual Gilbert historical lecture online, and the site also uses the photo-sharing website Flickr to publish its photos.

The most innovative part of the website is the Dublin Heritage site as shown in Figure 10 (<http://www.dublinheritage.ie>). This was launched in 2006 and offers fully searchable parish registers, a Dublin Diary which describes historical moments in the life of the city over the years on any particular day, an event calendar and contact details for local and family history groups.

Take in Figure 10

Figure 10 Dublin Heritage website



The main limitation of this site is that there is not a lot of actual digitised content from the collections available online. The Ordnance Survey maps are available to view online – but only within certain library branches. The material available in the Dublin and Irish collections could add great value to this site if it was digitised and online.

4.4 County Kildare Library

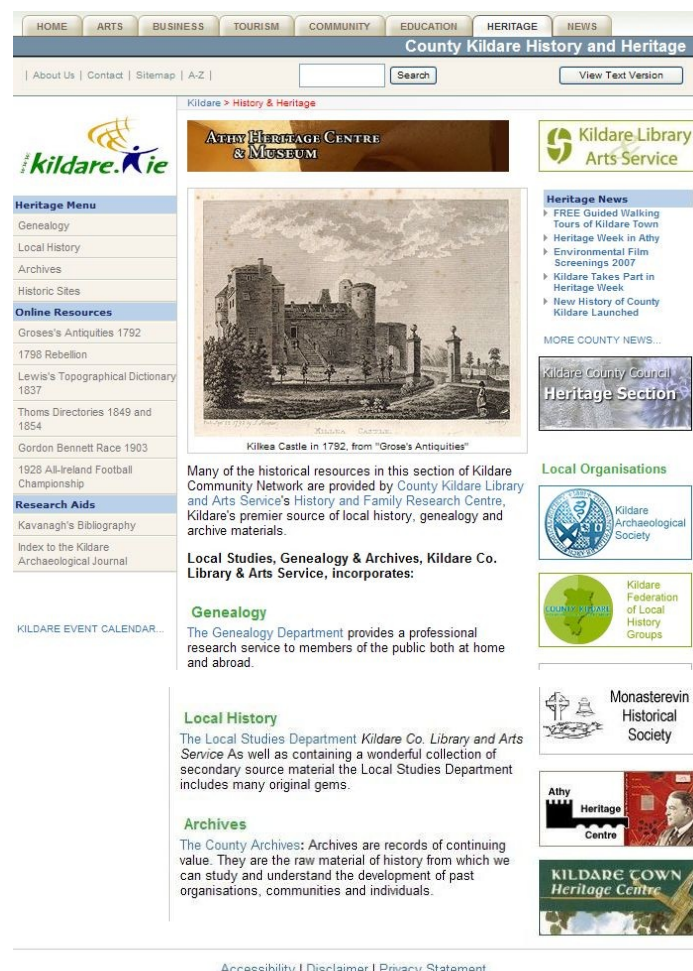
The local studies department of Kildare County library services incorporates local studies, genealogy and archives. It has had a strong web presence

(<http://www.kildare.ie/heritage>) since 2004 when it was incorporated into the Kildare County Council website. In 2006, the local studies department also introduced an e-history site (www.kildare.ie/ehistory) which promoted online publication of local history. (By the time this research was completed in September 2007, Kildare local studies had moved to form part of the Kildare library website - www.kildare.ie/library/localstudies)).

The heritage and history homepage is visually attractive and well structured as can be seen in Figure 11. A menu on the left-hand side has three main subject headings with individual topics links. Local studies groups each have their own banner which links to their webpages and there is a clear and updated “heritage news” section.

Take in Figure 11

Figure 11 Kildare Heritage and History homepage



In terms of content, there is a good selection of online digitised material. Kavanagh's *Historical Bibliography of County Kildare* is fully searchable as is the *Index to the Kildare Archaeological Journal*. Other useful county resources have been digitised and put online to increase both interest in local studies and accessibility to the collection.

One of the most useful resources available to researchers on the site is *Grosse's Antiquities of Ireland* which dates from 1792. The books contain descriptions and detailed accounts of Irish monuments and antiquities in the 18th century. Kildare local studies staff have taken the extracts and sketches relevant to the county and put them online.

Limitations of the site included the lack of help facilities for first-time users of the site and for those interested in family history. There was a large volume of useful text on the site, but there is room for improvement with regards to visual research aids like photos, prints and maps.

5. Results of interviews with local studies librarians and related staff

Interviews were carried out in June 2007 with the local studies and information services/systems staff of the four local authority libraries as described earlier. Detailed notes were taken from the interview recordings and these were manually analysed to find recurring themes. Interviewees were each given a number which was randomly allocated to ensure anonymity.

5.1 *The need to produce a local studies website*

All librarians interviewed were unanimous about the importance of producing a local studies website and of having a web presence for the library. Issues that came up in interviews were improving access, educating people, and a recognition that libraries have to keep up with the times if they are to survive and thrive in the information age.

"It's very important just to be out there...any library who doesn't take advantage of the Web needs to take a serious hard look at themselves."

"Well, it's there for information purposes in that people can see what's here before they get here, and they get a very comprehensive guide to what's here because on each individual page, you've usually got a PDF that lists the exact holdings."

“It’s a zeitgeist of the times. We were chiming in with the current thinking, I suppose, about making stuff accessible to people.”

“Why are libraries there? We’re there to disseminate information, (enable) access and it’s the most democratic, the best way of getting information out there to people”

5.2 Remote access

Providing remote access to local studies collections was another theme that recurred in the interviews. There were differences between the libraries in relation to where the majority of their users were originating from.

“Predominantly local...the biggest user percentage for that part of the site – the e-history site...would still be Ireland but closely followed by England and America.”

“I’d say definitely the majority are American, Australian...for genealogy (more than Irish) I’d say so; there’s just a lot more people out there of Irish descent than in Ireland.”

5.3 Staff involvement

There were major discrepancies in the local authorities visited between the numbers of staff allocated to support the local studies website. Some libraries had full-time members of staff employed only on the website, but some had to make do with working on the site whenever they found the time.

“The whole idea was to involve people in the different sections because they know what’s going on.”

“When I think of it now, a fifth of all visits to the library now are online.” (but the staff quota does not reflect this)

“I think it depends on how important you think a website is, and if you assign two or three people to it you’ll get an awful lot done. I find it hard to believe that they can’t find one or two people to do something as important as a website.”

5.4 Involving the users: donated material

Two of the library authorities which were interviewed had gone beyond the boundaries of their own local studies collection and were actively encouraging

volunteers to donate material to the site. This has two advantages: it allows people to self-publish on the site and to feel a greater connection with the library and its services, but it also gives the library material that it might never access otherwise.

“I always ask people to supply us with information, to contribute if they wish...you’re also enhancing the relationships with local history groups; (proving) we’re a worthwhile resource within the county.”

“We know that people have a lot of stuff out there and they’re looking for a good home for it, so we just said OK, we’ll take it and we’ll convert it and we’ll keep it on our database.”

“You get material that way that you might not come across yourself, you know, and you get family trees that people have actually written up that you couldn’t possibly write up yourself.”

5.5 Digitisation: demand and delivery

Digitisation has become an important issue for local studies librarians. They spoke of problems of delivering on digitisation plans and the demand for digitisation from the general public and the Irish government.

“The department wants this, the government wants this; Ask about Ireland, Digitisation; everybody wants this but delivering on it is a problem.”

Is there a demand?

“I think there is. I mean, because people are always asking, ‘Can I look at that on your website?’ especially when they’re looking for photographs and things like that.”

Deciding what and how to digitise?

“Well, it had to be out of copyright and then something that would be most useful...and I’d have known from demands what people looked for. There’s obvious ones that apply to each county, the county history, the Ordnance Surveys etc.”

5.6 Advantages of presenting local studies online

The librarians interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about presenting local studies online and how the use of technology could bring new users in and provide greater access for old users.

“The web presence is wonderful, and it’s a really good example, it’s a positive example in people’s eyes of what we do.”

“Well, it makes it more accessible to people and it advertises your collection as well. It makes you more visible I suppose.”

“Before, people had to queue up, had to physically come in to the local studies department to use the maps or the photographs, that’s gone now.”

5.7 Limitations of presenting local studies online

Two main issues emerged from all the interviews; problems of finding the time to maintain the sites and dealing with increased user demand, and also issues of IT.

Issues of time:

“It’s like with anything else, it’s just getting the time to put material together, to put it up... that’s sort of where things fall down a lot of the time. You’ve got great material but just actually getting the time to scan it and put text with it and put it up. It always seems to go on the long finger, you know.”

“It’s only a problem in so far as it takes time...but it definitely has increased the emails from around the world.”

Issues of IT:

“One of the problems, from talking to other local history librarians, is that they have to rely heavily on the IT section.....the other way to look at it is that we need to take control ourselves.”

“We’re sort of confined by the fact we haven’t got control over the content ourselves. It has to go via the Information Systems department.”

This was in direct contrast with libraries that controlled their own IT:

“We’re the only library in the country which does all of its own IT.....“We’re free to react to threats and opportunities...it gives us a confidence and a freedom.”

5.8 The virtual local studies library: the future or a fallacy?

When asked whether the local studies collection might ever be completely replaced by a virtual online reference service, most librarians emphasised the importance of consulting original sources and also the impracticality of putting a whole collection online.

“No. I mean ultimately it’s a good way of presenting a percentage...in terms of local history research, being able to come and search a range of different resources is still hugely important. It may change. I don’t think any of us can say no anymore.”

“You’re only ever going to have a selection, a shop window online.”

“People still like to see the originals, you know, they’re still in use.”

“I do think, as time goes by, more and more people will opt to use the services online, but it’s dependent on how much material we have online.”

“I might have thought it was a possibility, but given the experience (here) where we’ve digitised so much, the local studies centre is probably as busy as it ever was.”

5.9 Is the role of local studies librarians changing?

Attitudes towards the role of a local studies librarian were mixed. Some felt that technology would play a bigger role while some saw it as a further continuation of their current job.

“It’s changing now. I mean, this is the way it’s going. Staff change and they need to be constantly re-skilled. They also need to find out about technical changes.”

“I suppose that people would have done newsletters and things like that before...putting stuff up on the Web is fairly new I suppose. But I wouldn’t say it’s a huge change, it’s a kind of natural progression really.”

“Is it changing our role? I don’t know...but it’s certainly giving an entire new dimension to the delivery of services.”

5.10 What next for local studies sites?

All the people interviewed had great plans for expanding and improving their local studies websites. Most planned to improve the selection of images and text, some hoped to introduce more ambitious projects including audio.

“I could definitely see us using more external sites, the likes of Flickr and Community Walk to incorporate them into our own website through links etc.”

“The next big thing, I think, will be sound...Music. Music would be a big thing...and folklore....and sound.”

6. Discussion

As noted in the report, *Branching Out*, there is a lack of research into issues affecting Irish public libraries (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 1998) and this research was an exploratory work which aimed to produce some new data on the topic of local studies websites in Ireland.

6.1 Local authority libraries in Ireland and local studies websites: the overall picture

The first finding from this research was that (at the time of testing in June 2007) the majority of the 32 public library authorities in Ireland had some form of local studies website or webpage. Just four library authorities did not, and of these, three provided links to their library’s page on the Ask About Ireland site. However, the quality of the websites varied dramatically. The overall evaluation scores of these sites ranged from 38% to 90%. This indicates that website provision is not prioritised equally in all Irish library authorities. Reid (2003) notes that local authorities do not always have the funds to produce and maintain quality local studies sites and he acknowledges that a lack of imagination and drive are also often lacking. The enthusiasm, vision and dedication of the local studies librarians interviewed for this research was evident, and would indicate that these qualities are vital in the creation and maintenance of a successful local studies website.

Overall, Irish library authority local studies websites were well-presented and had a strong sense of branding. Most of the 28 evaluated websites had comprehensive bibliographic lists of local sources and services within the library collection. Given the traditional importance placed on bibliographies within library reference departments, this is not a surprising result. However, many of the websites failed to identify the purpose of the site, of the local studies department and who their target audience was. Novljan and Žumer (2004) argue that every public library should provide a clear mission statement and description of the library. Due to the large number of remote users accessing local studies sites, it is important to provide some

background information on the local studies department, the parent organisation and the online sources provided.

6.2 Remote users: the issue of access

Remote access is one of the biggest advantages of digitising local sources and making them available online (e.g. Parry, 1998; Reid, 2003). Analysis of the selected four local authority websites and interviews with local studies librarians revealed some interesting trends in website usage. The Irish diaspora has played a large role in the continuing importance of family history in Ireland (Hey, 1996). The four selected authorities investigated attracted remote users from the US, the UK, Europe, and Australia. Clare Library, in particular, provided excellent genealogical sources for family historians researching their roots from overseas. Dublin City and Cork City libraries also noted large volumes of users consulting the family history sections of their websites. Given the popularity of genealogy, it was surprising how few library authorities (just over 20%) provided help and advice for family historians. However, over 50% of the library websites evaluated did provide web links to genealogy sources.

6.3 Local studies and Library 2.0

The underlying philosophy of Library 2.0 is that the user should be central to the library service with the library actively encouraging user participation (e.g. Casey and Savastinuk, 2006) who describe how the use of Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis and forums can be used by libraries to achieve this aim.

One of the most interesting findings from this research was the adoption of Library 2.0 philosophy by three of the four selected library authorities. Clare Library had developed an active relationship with their users (local and remote) who were encouraged to donate their own written research for publication on the website. As well as an online visitors' book, the library had set up a web forum where users could communicate with library staff as well as each other; a virtual community. Kildare Library also emphasised the importance of getting the community involved through online publication and as Curran et al. (2007) note this gives a sense of ownership to the website user. Dublin City libraries were using the digital photo-sharing website, Flickr, to display library images and the website, Community Walk, to map where the

various library branches were located. Both of these sites are free to use, and are good examples of Web 2.0 technologies which can be adapted for library use.

Local studies can improve community spirit, social inclusion and lifelong learning (e.g. An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2003; Reid, 2003; Usherwood, 1999). However, giving the user the opportunity to develop their own online digital content is a new and exciting development in local studies. The vision of public libraries as a digital “network of community knowledge” (Chowdhury et al., 2006) has not yet been realised fully, but this research shows that it may become an important role for local studies departments in the future.

6.4 *Attitudes towards digitisation and providing online access to local studies collections*

The findings of the *Ask About Ireland* digitisation project found that librarians were “enthusiastic about the digitisation project and the manner in which it adds value to their collections” (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2003) and this was corroborated by this research. Interviews with selected local studies staff showed a positive attitude amongst the profession towards both digitisation and local studies websites. The advantages of digitising local studies collections (access, preservation of materials, and promotion) which were noted in the literature review (e.g. Barber, 2002; Parry, 1998; Reid, 2003) were also mentioned by the local studies professionals in the interviews. Most professionals interviewed felt strongly that a web presence was an important part of their service, increasing access to their collection and showing people what materials the library owned. However, the difficulties of digitising collections and making them available online were acknowledged by staff who noted that a website required extra time and manpower.

6.5 *Time and technology: the issues for staff*

Two recurring themes from the interviews with local studies professionals were that of time and technology. Although all librarians acknowledged that a website was a positive addition to their services, they also noted that it had increased their workload. There were variations between library authorities, as to the number of staff allocated to the website. In most cases, librarians were forced to juggle their workload between the local studies desk and the website and Novljan and Žumer (2004) note similar problems in Slovenian public libraries. Some library authorities had given more

importance to the website and employed full-time staff to run the site but this appeared to be the exception. Clausen (1999) in looking at websites in Danish libraries noted that for new technology to succeed it must be backed up by adequate staffing and training resources.

The second issue that emerged from the interviews was that of technology. Only one library authority was responsible for its own IT and this was a major limitation for local studies staff in terms of updating and managing their own content. While the Ask About Ireland project recommended a “central support and training resource” (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2003), most librarians interviewed preferred the idea of autonomy for their own website. This collaboration between different departments was also demonstrated by the fact that the interviews were carried out with local studies librarians as well as information services/systems managers.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This research was an exploratory work, and is an area which merits further research. Local studies and family history are growing areas of popularity within the library service. The literature review demonstrated the advantages of digitising local sources and making them available online, and this was backed up by interviews with local studies professionals. As Clausen (1999) notes, there should be “regular and continuous user-oriented evaluation of the Web site”. The following suggestions are recommended for further research:

- A yes/no checklist may not be the best approach to evaluate local studies online due to the variety of the material and the diversity of the user group.
- User testing is recommended as an alternative method of evaluation, with a carefully selected series of questions relating to the users’ experience of the site.
- These questions should focus more on the quality and depth of the information and how easily the users can navigate their way to the information they need.

- As users of the local studies service are so varied (schoolchildren, students, genealogists, archaeologists, local historians etc), a wide variety of users should test the site.
- Users should be encouraged to provide extra comments and feedback; this is valuable qualitative data which can be used to improve the service.

The use of semi-structured interviews with a select sample of local studies professionals provided valuable and richly informative data on changing technology, attitudes and challenges to the sector. Due to the time limitations of this research, the number of interviews was limited to those involved in the most progressive websites. The checklist revealed a big discrepancy between library authorities and their standards of website provision. A question which emerged from this research is why was there such a gap? A nationwide study, interviewing local studies professionals in all library authorities, could provide some answers to this question.

The research revealed several interesting trends in Irish local studies and online presentation of local collections. The following recommendations are a combination of the researcher's own findings and suggestions made by local studies professionals during interviews:

a) *Staffing issues*

- A full-time member of staff should be allocated to the library website if possible. As online usage grows, the website may become busier than some branches. This should be reflected in staff allocation.
- Ongoing staff training in IT is essential if staff are to manage the website content themselves.
- Greater communication and collaboration between local studies departments nationwide is recommended – librarians should study other local studies websites and learn from each-other (Clausen, 1999, p.85).

b) *Website content*

- Development of FAQ section of website could reduce e-mail volume and pressure on staff time (Reid, 2003).
- The website should always include information about the library, the local studies department, and the aims and objectives of the site.

- Online publication of users' work can expand the local studies collection and improve relations with library users.
- Library users should be encouraged to participate in the website, to give feedback and provide material. Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and forums can help to achieve a sense of an online community.
- Digitised materials such as photos, postcards and maps can add value to the website.
- Use of free web resources like Flickr and Community Walk can also add value to the website, as can a well-maintained list of useful web links.
- Family history is a growing area of local studies. Online help for genealogists as well as useful web links and resources are relatively easy to put on a website, add value and could increase use of website.
- Ireland has a strong oral and storytelling tradition. The use of audio on websites could promote oral history collections as well as encouraging contemporary oral histories to be recorded.

c) Website design

- Websites should be easy to use and to navigate.
- Text should be adapted to read on screen.
- All materials should be easy to print.
- Websites need to be constantly maintained (Clausen, 1999). A last-updated date should be included, if possible.
- Links should be constantly maintained. There should be no dead links on the site.
- Local studies is said to be socially inclusive (Usherwood, 1999). The website should reflect this, adhering to Web Accessibility Initiative accessibility standards.
- The local studies website should entice the user to use the actual collection as well as the site. The 'jewels' of the collection should be displayed on the website (Falk, 1999).

To conclude with the words of the *Branching Out* report, Irish local studies collections "comprise a resource of great national and indeed international importance" (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 1998). The challenge facing the local

studies sector is not only to preserve this resource but to recognise the value of the Internet in bringing valuable materials to a wider audience. In this way, the “national and international importance” of Irish special collections will not fade, but will be embraced by a new generation of users.

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Appendix A: Breakdown of Evaluation Criteria

- 1. Simple address URL:** A simple URL address should be short enough for people to remember or guess without using a search engine
- 2. Source is fast to access:** For the purpose of this study, a download time of 30 seconds to 1 minute was considered efficient using a broadband connection.
- 3. Homepage downloads efficiently:** Without “under-construction” signs or missing content
- 4. Attractive homepage**
- 5. Clear indication of contents of site**
- 6. Easy to link to local studies page:** Added by researcher in context of project.
- 7. Purpose of site is clear:** statement of aims and objectives if possible.
- 8. Target audience is clear:** part of identifying the purpose of a source.
- 9. Information is suited to target audience needs:** In the context of this research, was the information relevant to those interested in local and family studies?
- 10. Information is well categorised and organised:** i.e. is it clearly labelled and and with good organisation of content .
- 11. Good quality content:** Relevance of content in the context of local studies was considered a key element when evaluating this.
- 12. Information appears to be accurate:** Based on researcher’s knowledge.
- 13. Grammar and spelling are correct**
- 14. Branding on every page:** An important element of an organisational website
- 15. Contact on every page**
- 16. Name, address, phone details:** An important factor for a public organisation website.
- 17. Author(s) of material on site are clearly identified**
- 18. References are provided where necessary**
- 19. Counter to mark number of visitors to site:** Taken from a suggestion by Cooke (2001, p.71).
- 20. Latest revision date provided:** this should be well labelled. However, it is worth noting that this does not always change automatically when content changes.
- 21. Content is updated frequently:** Cooke notes that this is a key way to assess the currency and maintenance of a source (2001, p.77). In a local studies context it can be difficult to assess currency of material. However, the news and events section of the site is usually a good indication of currency of content.
- 22. Links are current and working properly:** Waller (2004, 2.7) states that there should be no missing or broken links on a website. However, this was amended to allow two dead links (but no more) on each site tested.

- 23. Important information “above the fold”:** Waller (2004, 2.1) states that only 30% of users will bother scroll down the page so it’s best to have important information at the top of the page.
- 24. Easy to read:** Is the text easy to read? Waller (2004, 2.2) recommends that long lines of text should be avoided as they are difficult to read on-screen and that appropriate fonts and sizes should be used.
- 25. Printer friendly:** Can relevant material be selected and printed easily? The researcher selected text from each site for printing to test this.
- 26. Consistent design throughout site:** Consistent design throughout a site can make it easier to use.
- 27. Use of multimedia to add value to site:** Multimedia is taken to mean the use of sound and/or video to add value to the site.
- 28. Use of images to add value to site:** Images include photos, postcards, maps etc used in an appropriate manner to add value to the local studies element of the site.
- 29. Evidence of digitisation on site:** Digitisation is taken to mean anything which has been converted from its original format into a digitised form for use on the site.
- 30. User is able to move around the site with ease**
- 31. Site Map:** A site map is a list of all the pages on the website in formalised order and can be useful for site navigation (Bradley, 2002, p.54).
- 32. Text only option:** This can speed up access for users and is recommended by Cooke (2001, p.84).
- 33. Access for disabled:** Does the site have facilities to increase text size? Is voice-recognition software available? Does it adhere to W3 accessibility guidelines? W3C is the main web accessibility standards group on the Internet. It regularly updates its Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to ensure standardised Web accessibility for users with disabilities (visual, hearing, cognitive, or physical) which affect their use of the Web (<http://www.w3.org/WAI/>).
- 34. Clear text links:** Waller (2004, 3.2) notes that links should look like links rather than part of the text.
- 35. Search facilities are easy to use:** Smith recommends a thorough evaluation of the search engine provided for the resource (Smith, 1997, 6.6.3).
- 36. Help information available:** This can include FAQs (frequently asked questions) recommended by Bradley (2002, p.126) or directions for using the site recommended by McLachlan (2002, 3.B).
- 37. Images to have ALT=:** Cooke advises that images should be tagged with a meaningful description (Cooke, 2001, p.79).
- 38. Help for first time genealogists:** Helpful advice on how to get started, sources and services to access and useful contacts.
- 39. Links to genealogy sources:** Useful Irish national sources include the National Library of Ireland and the National Archives. General useful sources include Family Search and GenForum.

- 40. Links and/or contact details for local and family history groups:** Comprehensive details on local community groups.
- 41. Comprehensive detail on library's inhouse collection:** Enough information on the library's collection to help the user decide if the library has what they need.
- 42. Unique features/facilities not available on other sites:** Does the site have facilities or features that are not available anywhere else?
- 43. Good promotion of library's local studies collection online:** Does the library promote their collection through the website?
- 44. Information on and/or access to local publications:** Either through online publication or listing of publications.
- 45. Bibliography of useful local studies sources:** A useful sources for researchers to prepare them for a visit to the library.
- 46. Information on costs of services:** If applicable.
- 47. Links to www.askaboutireland.ie:** Does the site contain a link to its own presence on the Ask about Ireland website?
- 48. Use of audio links to promote oral history or local documentaries:** Is audio used on the site?
- 49. Information on local studies events in the library or community:** Does the website publicise local studies events?
- 50. Public invited to contribute to website (blogs, email, web forums):** Is there a forum for the public to communicate with each-other or the website?

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